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### Man faces gold

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THE MAN FACES GOLD

By

David Long

B. A. , Albion College, 1970

M. A. , Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

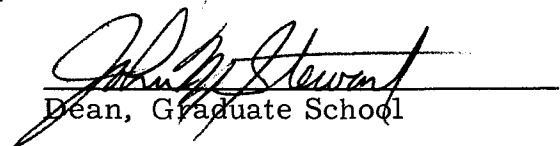
Master of Fine Arts

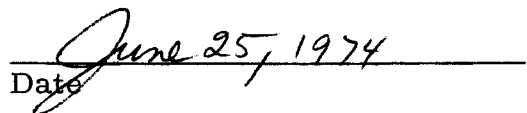
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## PART ONE

...las plebeyas figurillas,  
que el lienzo de oro del ocaso manchan.

--Antonio Machado



## THIS IS NOT A LONG STORY

--for Terry Stokes

A man wanted to be quiet. It is only  
the river that holds him back, a house  
that cannot be built. The man thought  
all he could about a chair.  
It was not love he needed but a shovel  
standing in the ground. He made his ears  
into rain barrels, his mouth a black skillet.  
He made his arms into one useful thing after  
another. Twice a day he set aside part of his food.

The man listened for the sound of his heart  
bobbing in a distant harbor. He listened  
but there were engines, the cries of sad  
crustaceans. He asked the woman who brought his meals  
to leave him. In her place a voice  
that had not yet spoken. It would please him  
to sleep with a fire in the room. It would  
please him if the moon would be still in the field grass.

This is not a long story. This is about a man.  
The man comes home from work & exhales common metals.  
When he lies down on the sofa, instructions  
with wire tails fall from his ear. His family huddles  
over his body. Father's so full he has fallen asleep.  
Mother sees a red bowl where his face should be.  
His daughter sees herself & cannot forgive. The son  
sees his own fingers stacked like cordwood  
on the rising belly. The man wanted his story  
to end with a single bone held between the lips.

He says, picture a man watching his breath  
turn white. Picture a man with nothing to lose.

## PULSE

I walk out of the last crumbling houses  
on the outskirts of night.  
They have taken all I had.  
My hands smell of burnt rope.

## POEM FOR MYSELF &amp; OTHERS

In the winter of 1947 you made drafts of a poem.  
 It was snowing & you stayed indoors. My mother  
 was careful about stairs, carrying me  
 for the last time. My gills made their change & waited.  
 You got a letter from your publisher & clipped  
 the commemorative for a nephew. She waited  
 for my father to climb the long hill of Lonwood Avenue.  
 She was taking stilbestrol to keep me in place.  
 Now she uses cortisone to keep her neck  
 limber above the smooth neck of the cello. I'm sure  
 you cribbed the margins of the typesheet,  
 avoided a rhyme & let your chowder go cold beside the window.  
 He wanted to know why he was still waiting  
 for the last of your manuscript. In her sixth month  
 she still got sick. They were thinking Elizabeth  
 for a girl. A simple coincidence: a poem old as I am.  
 You went over the galleys to another book the day  
 I rode the three-wheeler down the cellar stairs  
 & lay completely still in her shattered hands.  
 Or you sleep all day. I know nothing about your life.  
 I am reading a poem & it is not quite snowing.  
 There is nothing about snow in the poem. I stay inside.  
 It says you've been dead seven years, younger than  
 my father who waits for a letter.  
 Was the poem success? Did it explain dying young?  
 The fat is beginning to bunch around my waist.  
 My wife & I made love all morning.  
 I can keep nothing out of the poem. A simple irony:  
 being the girl Elizabeth,  
 stilbestrol grows cancer in the black window  
 of my uterus. We die the same year. The same day.  
 I am holding my leg into the space of this room,  
 the muscles hard as wood. I spend whole days  
 in awe of mountains, the immaculate snow, the distance.

## NORTHEAST

When I was ten  
& lonesome at the end of summer  
storms came from there,  
failed hurricanes doubling back  
in the North Atlantic,  
driving across Newfoundland.  
Suddenly my father was home.  
We went outdoors in our mac-coats  
into the rain  
& strung guywires  
softened with rubber hose  
on the young maples.  
I could stand leaning into the wind,  
nothing holding me up.  
That day when the fields turned blue  
we leaned 2 X 4's against the big window  
in the bedroom  
while a place under the eaves  
caught the stream of air again & again,  
moaning like the town's civil defense.  
Then a big hardwood  
we had no idea was hollow  
fell across the road,  
roots like field mice twitching in wind  
from the northeast.  
Later, when the storm's mauled eye  
passed over us,  
my father & I stood together,  
new quiet rising in the country between us.

## ODE TO THE LIFE

1.

It is not important to have a name.  
You meet the edge & break into mist.  
The land rises up as the sun passes away  
& your hands  
will be two bloody fish on the rocks.

You will sweat out nights with the fever  
chewing the boards from under you  
& in the gray slack  
before morning  
grab for the pulpy new thing  
that carries your chest throbbing to the surface.

There will be more women.  
You turn from the sun dying in milkweed  
& she is there.  
This doorway where a candle inside fur  
stares with its one good eye.  
Her dark sisters  
set fire to your handful of fragile maps.  
You orphan your words.

2.

It is almost another lifetime.  
Your voice  
alone on the skin of a northern lake.  
Beneath the oil of splicings  
a spirit  
scratches among grains of thirst.  
Close beneath the cork  
of your voice  
the terrible monotone of pike running  
the coldest spots on earth.

Your voice will see itself  
a pale child  
riding a bus through snow,  
through a wilderness of afternoons,  
riding with grief  
smoldering in its tiny lap.

Beneath the cold sill of this life  
the earth spreads wide  
& small clouds of breath  
rise  
from the common grave of your work.  
Now your fingers are gently removed  
one by one  
& you believe in the life.

## WHERE YOU LIVED

These are the floorboards  
where your mother danced the night,  
the door your father used.  
This is where you wanted life,  
the last house for miles.  
Beyond its crippled fences  
an open range where the sun winters.

What remains is colored glass.  
His footfalls on the plank stairs.  
Her summer squash turned bitter & black  
from waiting. The windows  
facing east still bang these mornings  
with the skulls of young grosbeaks  
& the weeds grow  
graceful & hard in the afternoon.

There is heat lightning on the horizons  
& things pass on in the wind.  
There is no need to hurry, your old  
coat, back on its peg.  
There in the storm cellar, there  
in the company of sweating stones & earth  
you find a way  
of listening for what you know.

## MORNING AMONG THE DAYS

The mountains are far away.  
Mist rises out of the crops as the sun  
lays open the valley.  
My eyes stare into the silent wheel  
tracks of abandoned children.  
My legs too,  
believe they have been left behind.

Already it is a day to struggle with the heat,  
the sky that is filled with circles.  
In the distance the earth flares  
behind a tractor,  
figures moving across the field.

In her gaze I am a prisoner  
torn at the chest  
& she mends with calico the scar that smolders.  
The sun gleams  
from the forearms, the biceps of this strongman.  
Yes, I can take this leather strap,  
pull the furrow clean.



## WATERING

I take the rain's place  
in the blue of another day gone.  
The moon white over the shed.  
The broccoli's leaves are dark money  
for a drink when the luck runs dry.  
Under this clay loam, onions,  
the fortune teller's globes fill with light.  
The last seeds, bean plants  
broke ground today, looking back.  
My fingers grow stiff on the busted nozzle,  
my old pants, my boots wet through.  
A way of taking life into my own hands.

## THE MAN FACES GOLD

It is almost another year.  
The high clouds have come  
& a day beyond  
all the rain a man could use.

The last minutes are gold.  
The gathered straw of his day goes up  
& the road is lit  
like a face that turns away.  
The return of black branches.  
The clatter of dishes in a kitchen  
where a light burns.

## AT THE WEATHER STATION

Above the gold  
funnel of the valley.  
The city,  
its purple river, flattening buildings  
& beyond,  
the airport, a factory's smoking  
& the chute  
deep in mountains  
where the sun goes.  
This is what I want  
for the short season that is my life,  
each day to see  
the churning of all color into gold  
that is not death  
but the one throat song of death,  
not dying  
but the ritual of death  
laid across the hard earth,  
the mountains without trees.  
Above me  
a beacon, red & white,  
turns,  
the tallest show of life for miles.  
The pine wind rises strong  
turning cold  
as the light fails over ground flowers  
that cover my quiet feet.

## THE MAN DREAMS OF A DRY TIME

In this dream the bread won't rise.  
Kisses fall  
from your cheek like the wind stroking gravel.  
A white horse paces in the irrigation ditch.  
The sun never seemed this alone.  
In the shade of a familiar porch  
the calico lady jerks bare her chest  
& her breasts stare at you like cow's eyes.  
In this dream your fingers too brown  
to bring in goods & your sad memory turns to thirst.  
Has the man ever been thirsty like this?  
Would he dive from the roof  
body a paper airplane to the heart of the mossy cistern?  
Finally you drink.  
You drink & the thirst  
is a dead man slung across your weeping shoulders.  
You wake from this dream, a boy  
standing in the door, teeth striking like flints.

## THE HEAT OF AUGUST

Now you will not take food.  
Your cheeks are burlap  
two faces of a sack emptying grain.  
You go to the window  
ruined in dust  
& watch your poor sister drift  
in a rowboat without arms.  
In the light beyond your bowed head  
the pine that never dies  
sheds like a frightened boy  
under the breath of long drought  
& the screen door fiddles brown  
hopeless love on the wind.  
You soak your hands  
that were once lovely fishes  
in your lap's shallow basin.  
It is always like sundown  
where your closing eyes fall,  
gold beneath the skin,  
ripe potatoes left in the ground.

AFTER THE WATER DIES

Is it always like this ?  
Your brown eyes lodging in my chest  
& beyond your shoulders that dry  
in the twilight like a turned hull  
my eyes walk out  
leading a man whose string is cut.

## AUGUST

The grass blows away.  
The people stand on the bridges  
& down the valley their stern father  
goes off rubbing his neck.  
You turn from me in the bed,  
your back & smooth legs hot like a mare's  
frightened in running.  
Towards morning our sleep  
two piles of hay, flares fire  
in a dark place that is no blessing.  
Now rain. Hollyhocks  
decadent in the smell of grape  
sway against the gray wall.  
You search for your clothes.  
Cold pearls roll from a hanger  
left outdoors,  
bang the dust into clouds as if the two  
earth & water would never join.

## OCTOBER

In this gold light we may never own  
you walk among the corn  
who are old men now, old sex.  
They want to call you back,  
to explain something that is not easy.  
But they watch your thin shoulders  
grow smaller  
& they imagine your small breasts  
under your shirt stiffening with cold.  
We are wrong to be this lonely  
in a place that has been so rich.  
Even the flies come indoors.  
I see your face leaning toward sleep,  
fear of a white stranger  
putting your hands to bed.  
I see you, my love,  
walking through this brown country,  
across eggshells lying on water.



## PART TWO

## OPENING MY EYES IN A COLD ROOM

1.

In this sleep were brothers.  
I was the youngest, quick & round,  
would not shut up for anything.  
As we walked the streets they pointed  
to an upstairs window  
where geraniums grew,  
sturdy women, red against a sinking mill town.  
I had silver in my hand  
but the youngest sister turned away.  
I was not told it would be like this.  
The other whose hair did not shine  
took me between her legs  
then threw me off before I was done,  
as if I were empty clothes.  
At the door she turned back, sorry.  
She closed her robe, took my hand.  
I was old enough in this lost bedroom  
to know there was nothing for her to say.  
My sister you are a good woman.  
Now where are my good brothers  
whose arms are all around my shoulder.

2.

I open my eyes in a cold room,  
my whole legs stiff  
as though I climbed endless stairs  
in my sleep, out of shape,  
as if I hadn't stood up full in months.  
At twilight a couch is no cocoon  
& this time of year no sunset  
to bronze what gets left over.  
For the first time in my life  
I let the phone ring dead.  
Out in the sleet cars pass  
like sad exhalations.

3.

Death is at my left shoulder & I don't see him.  
Death with blue maps unfolding.  
Death wearing family faces.  
Still I waste my body.  
Still I let other people know who I am.

4.

Soon I will get up & be a husband.  
You leave my left shoulder alone  
except to touch it when you scream,  
your brown eyes not my sisters.  
There is no way on this earth I can make you happy.  
It is possible to make stories,  
what lovers see in each other,  
to fill a cold house  
with the ring of two stones  
striking together.

5.

You are salt.  
Then a red flower fluffing out wings under snow.  
You are the darkness slipping over ring fingers.  
You are a cry that goes on forever.

## WHEELS PERFECT AS WINGS

In this crease between mountains where  
no town ever stayed, steel houses hover  
over the scrub-dirt, under each floor  
a moist crawl space & wheels  
perfect as wings. Here in the long wind  
a woman holds the doorway open, children,  
empty holsters on her thighs.  
The man wears a truck cab, sweats his running  
in place, the valley that is a blue  
funnel. When the light is down their bodies  
close in like a fist & they wait  
with stones for the canyon-maker,  
the yoke to burn.

## TONIGHT

Tonight I am sad about the man who limps all day.  
 The short-order cook whose car won't run  
 & her sister whose mustache is not kissed.  
 The nurse who cannot stand white.  
 The old parents who circle in light snow.  
 The man who writes each sadness down.  
 Listen, I know it is no trick  
 to wake in an empty house, twilight,  
 feeling betrayed.

Tonight my voice falls in  
 with its idiot progeny.  
 My hands too much twins to make  
 a spark against each other.  
 A storm flurries out the canyon mouth,  
 good fingers of forgetting,  
 & the darkness of the hour  
 settles perfectly around the darkness of the room.

In August I watched my two pines die of thirst  
 & did nothing.  
 The needles collected in circles of evidence  
 like tears that fall only once.  
 Now the snow catches on the stiff branches,  
 rubs the cradle sticks of two empty grosbeak nests.  
 It falls on the old man & wife, arm in arm,  
 turning the corner. It falls against the windows.

It is not my fault but there is no other way.  
 I would like to give you a door that opens in,  
 hot food & after that a story  
 that takes a long while in telling.  
 I would rub your ankles  
 & search the old soil of your eyes  
 for a sign of red buds opening to flower.  
 I am partly lying when I say this.

## USING THE DAY TO ADVANTAGE

Give it away to people.  
 Ask nothing serious of the asphalt,  
 vast melon snoring in the plaza sun.  
 O, today my feet are the woman's fine hands.  
 She lowers yards of scented rope  
 over the edge of noon  
 & here in the cool of blind buildings  
 my groin thumps with bullfrogs  
 & I climb for you.  
 A man claims to be champion cowboy of 1952.  
 We drink up.  
 We make our teeth that much sharper  
 on dried beef, shins, the rustle of hands  
 striking over distances too blue to imagine.  
 His bandaged head rears white  
 &, listen, his eyes break harness. Later,  
 I discover my own two lungs, painted battleships.  
 My hands incanting doors thick with wax.  
 All over things are falling,  
 gold off the walls.  
 Where is the one good chair?  
 The sawdust that dances on water?  
 Now men with gray tongues crowd my house  
 & the evening clanks  
 with vows, humility, in the failing light,  
 the promise of drowning.

## THE MAN &amp; THE CROW

There is a man rowing across a vast brilliant lake.  
He is humming to himself as the oars crack  
in the water. He pulls the small boat up on an island.  
Over his bony shoulder he carries a canvas sack  
in which there is a single crow. Later,  
the crow gets away & flies without a word until sunset.  
At the edge of a desert he builds a house.  
In the middle of the night he is wakened by the sound  
of mushrooms popping through the cellar floor. The crow  
& his two sons try to beat them back into the dirt  
with wooden mallets. They are growing too quickly.  
They are coming up everywhere. He sends his sons away  
& floods the cellar with water. He is back in bed  
when an angel in the likeness of a lobster appears to him.  
Before the light of morning, he says to the crow,  
your stomach will turn to kelp. Your daughters will walk  
forever on their hands. Meanwhile, the man burns his boat  
& sits up all night admiring the fire. In the flames  
he imagines a long shimmering staircase. At the end  
he passes through a doorway & there is a field of cabbages.  
He walks among the many rows of vegetables  
& he lies down. The moon rises. At last, at last,  
he cries. Just before dawn the pale leaves peel back.

## THE COOK IS BEAT

Harland is tired of being tired,  
 sick & tired of finding  
 warm water in his eyes, bruises  
 like twisters failing across his mild shins.  
 Harland's hand sends  
 too much milk to the viscera of an omelette,  
 watches the hottest gobber of grease  
 lick insults up its pale arm.  
 Harland the old butcher.

Out in the flat where the wheatland's  
 plowed in, landing strips  
 fallow in darkness,  
 the wind is old when it reaches you.  
 Old as you,  
 & Harland, no one is landing.  
 In town the air blossoms white,  
 early from the stacks of Farmers Grain Exchange,  
 hard shots of steam & smoke,  
 tight as those buttocks you flashed, once, Harland,  
 tight as one hundred thousand eggs.

What can you do so tired?  
 It's only gum, only excuses  
 growing used to one another.  
 What would put a shine to that old egg, Harland?  
 When would she crack at your gold tooth flash,  
 old butcher? old egg man? old over easy?



## THE INVENTION OF NEON

The day after his wife left  
he drove the old truck  
out of the shallow valley  
where the hardwoods turned more yellow  
than curtains waving goodbye.  
That night he had no heater.  
He tried to sing a blanket over his knees  
as the stars began to flicker  
like doe's eyes in the rear view.  
He stopped for a young man along the road.  
The road only goes the one way, he said.  
Coming out of the mountains they found  
a man with blackened eyes,  
bright finches flashing in a cage  
& farther on two brothers crouching  
over a poor fire. Get in,  
the man said, we're going to town.

## DREAMING TOOTH, ETC.

For weeks now I've dreamed of my tooth. I wake in the middle of the night & feel for it with my tongue as a man in a strange city checks his wallet, as a fisherman reels in to see worm covering his hook. Asleep five minutes, I dream it is snatched from my mouth by a wildcat who has waited until I've turned to face the campfire, the woman of inevitable dreams. The sound is like a thirteen year old girl giving birth to a zero. I can't face anyone. Words dribble off my rubber lips like pabulum. Even old friends avoid me thinking they will see tiny visions of their deaths sparkling in my hopeless grin. I let the rent fall due, let the newspapers stay under the bushes, collect in black puddles. I contemplate a long trip by dog sled. I contemplate holing up in a vast & articulate lost & found. It's no use. Like plugging another hole in the skiff to let the water out. I tongue my chopper in the dark. There. There. I feel you in the bed beside me. Your breathing is shallow, your dreams jutting to the surface like teeth.

## SMALL TOWN, LEARNING LOVE

Every kid in town is Badacre.  
Nobody hears good.  
Joline is tasting something she found  
in her ear, something like chewing tobacco.  
Her daddy left it there.  
Her daddy had hands big enough to make it count, Buster.  
Her uncle who was the hardworker wanted to love up  
her ma so bad once he drove clear to Lustre  
on a John Deere just to get his head clean.  
Joline thinks her cousin got nice eyes.

Friday night the stands erupt in blue flowers.  
Badacre setting up Badacre, blue delight.  
After the game Joline's brother, Joe, who's older than her,  
watches the moon.  
Joe knuckles the big wheel.  
Joe tries hard to forget what he sees when he is alone,  
the oil filter that fits over his teeth like braces,  
& looking into his blue & gold shorts & finding  
sludge, Jesus, a straight exhaust,  
& he can't explain.

Every road looks past the elevator where the moon is.  
Joe can't think of a time it wasn't snow,  
frozen birds spotting the ground.  
A time when the wheat is eager & he learns love again.  
Joe listens to his father's moon.  
Joe screams: I loved that blue flower so much  
I stuffed it in my pocket.  
I loved that sheep so much I dropped it.  
I dropped it.

## WEST

He is driving into the sun.  
So gold he sees black.  
His shadow, black elastic, his black  
children returning to the last house  
where mother & father  
douse the night fire, their eyes.  
So gold & far he sees black,  
so many locomotives running away.  
The ground cools  
like steel rails passed over in the twilight  
& glittering rodents make their way  
to drink at the blue river.  
All the woman left was a gold tooth  
she wore between her breasts.  
It is not much to go on  
but he swallows  
& bends his ear to the murmuring earth.

## MOTEL

I'm here on nobody's black bed  
rolling darkness into bandages,  
into eyepatches  
& the walls are conches  
where a sandy blonde punches air,  
jagged balloons muscling through her love,  
not dying.

This stupidity of molecules is enough  
light to know wings.

How can your voice heal turkeys who are not hawks,  
or blow away the black feathers  
that crawl gently into my lungs?  
Invest in radios that turn into rain,  
in children who cruise  
under open stars,  
who honk each other awake,  
no end in sight.

## INDUSTRY

Snow touches the rutted alley.  
It seems like a hundred days  
since I've listened  
to myself being quiet.  
A few dead willow sticks  
lie in the short grass  
as if a wooden bicycle had grown old here.  
Yesterday's big wind's gone  
into mountains to the south.  
Now, all of a sudden,  
this headdress of snow.  
Last night when we talked  
I thought of all the things I owe you.  
I thought of all the loud things men do  
to please women,  
how they survive gifts.  
Why are you looking at me like that? you said.  
Beneath this old tree I listen  
to my eyelashes,  
as a man can turn in his blankets,  
late at night,  
awake for no reason.

## DOE

Oliver skins a frozen doe  
hung five days in my shed.  
He rubs the knife in cold circles  
on a stone his wife holds,  
her breath rising against the light  
like smoke through the cracked lid of a wood stove.  
He cuts in & pulls the skin from the flank  
watching not to slice the steak  
or damage the flecked hide  
more than shot did below the neck.  
Longer you leave it hang,  
he says, the more its tender.

I believe him.  
I believe what is in his eyes.  
You make jerky, he says,  
out of those mother-red strips.  
I see the joined fingers shine in the carcass,  
imagine the meat salted in a dim light,  
brittle as tarpaper in wind.  
Beyond where he works  
day-old snow crumples the chard  
& the branches of my dead willow  
grab stubborn at the sky.  
That sound now is bone,  
you don't have to tell me.  
His wife smiles at me in the doorway,  
her quick eyes warm the ground, going home,  
warm newsprint folded under her arm.

## HOME

She keeps watch on the horizon of busted seeds.  
For days only black birds, a knowledge of wind.  
He comes home from no rain. No silver  
dancing in the dark vestibule of his pocket,  
no tiny fishes excited in his mouth.  
Only skin, the burned over fields  
& a shirt that chafes like the flag  
of another country more dry & beaten yet.  
He follows her across the porch,  
through the doorway that is past flowering.  
The pictures hang straight, the stove  
cold as morning. Now she raises her arms,  
blue rivers stream down her breasts.  
She lies on the fresh linen saying his name  
& he touches her woman's thighs  
like a man who has never seen trees.  
To the south a crow glides over stream beds  
& his brother crow walks a dry path  
to the source of blue stones.



## THE MAN EMPTIES A HAND

It was night,  
more than cold.  
He took part of himself  
a refrigerator  
out past the fences in the moonlight.  
He removed the thick door.  
The nice greens & her cold cuts  
he left for the possum  
sure to come  
& the irresistible parts of rubber  
for the hungry coon.  
He hung the shelves from a tree  
where they spangled  
& touched like lynched men of aluminum.  
He took the motor from its white  
house & sat with it in the snow,  
could think of nothing of any consolation  
for the generator, the drooping  
fan belt.  
He went home.  
A puddle shone in the corner  
Warm & yellow.  
The sobbing gone,  
the bags lying open.

### PART THREE

## LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

That morning over shredded wheat St. John listened to the Blackfeet weatherman from Browning on the radio, then set out extra bowls of dried food. The cat looked down from the window sill where the lilacs, weeks past flowering, brushed the screen; she winked, dozed, her fur warming. St. John knew he'd need a few things before leaving, knew it was foolish to go all that way and have to compromise at the end. To train like a fighter and then lose because the last touch of polish had not been applied to the punch. He had coffee in the drug-store downtown where he was known as a regular, then walked down a side street to the antique shop.

The woman named Snowy stood at the counter reading the state weekly, yawning against the back of her hand.

"Well, if it isn't the king of glass doorknobs," she said.

St. John smiled, a man pleased by small tokens, recognitions.

St. John poked along the glass cases. Where the light from the street fell on the front of the shop there was an order to the things for sale, almost frightening in its unattended regularity, but where that light failed in the rear of the store, there were things piled, a

dark back room with furniture parts linked together in a heap. St. John thumbed a stack of circus posters, saw the framed picture of a monkey wearing a football jersey, number five, 1928.

"Something else I need today. "

"I have it, " she said.

"Rolls for a player piano. Old one. "

"Take another step back and you'll trip on them. "

"Nothing too battered. Nothing whorehouse. "

"What kind of machine would they be for? "

"Jacobsen, Special Edition. Came out on the train before the turn of the century. Believe that? Call it mint shape, " he said.

She opened the box for him. "Not a rip in there, " she said. "Every one of those holes is cut perfect. " He figured her for late forties, slim, a spray of freckles beneath her eyes.

"I'm sure they'll fit, " she said.

"Well, I've got it right out in the truck. "

"Oh? Where's she going? "

"L. A. "

St. John pictured his truck again slipping into the weave of machinery on the freeways into the city. Then the slick facade of Recycled Interiors, Incorporated, and the alley, heavy with fried food where he backed the truck in and unloaded his freight, his livelihood, somewhere over two thousand board-feet of weathered Montana lumber:

disassembled cabins, barns, sheds, broad-board fencing. In the new life they would decorate the walls of an insuranceman's office, would spruce up the atmosphere of a postwar cocktail lounge striving to become a singles bar. Recycled Interiors. The square hole of a nail that once held a tin water dipper above a kitchen pump would stare down upon a world of mixed drinks and double-knit polyester; a freshly hatched Rocky Mountain arachnid would find itself sliding down a glistening avocado filing cabinet. At the incomprehensible rates per board-foot, St. John knew it was more than an ordinary living. It was some kind of salvage rights.

"I was never in that state," she said.

St. John dug through a tin of buttons with the blade of his pocket knife. "You ought to. It's like nothing else." He picked out one that read State Exposition 1926 and pinned it to the flap of his denim jacket. "Figure this in," he said.

"Yeah," he said to the woman, "you ought to do just that. For a day or two anyway."

As an offer it had resembled talk on the street about the long blistering heat they would surely have, the lack of rain, a constant.

"Okay," she said.

"Huh?"

"You talked me into it."

St. John looked around the shop. "Uh..." He looked into his

hands. "You ought to know I drive this thing pretty much straight through."

"Lots cooler at night," she said.

St. John watched her walk the length of the shop and check the back door, her salt and pepper hair knotted and wrapped in a scarlet cloth at the shoulder, her thin legs moving as if she parted tall standing grain with each step, precise and graceful as a sharpened scythe worked by supple wrists. She locked the glass front door and looked into St. John's washed-out blue eyes and smiled. She handed him the cardboard box of rolls.

"On me," she said.

It was a love of the used. A love he extended not to what was simply worn into an attractive, predictable old-age, but to things that were first made well and through some flirtation with the great mystery, had lasted. He looked out at the desert. As a child on the Hi-Line, a need for the long look had grown in him. Lying on baled hay as his father bumped the pickup over chuckholes, he had learned to appreciate seeing an entire storm welling up in the summer sky: the place in the west over the faint trim of mountains where it began and the other place beyond the town's dark buildings where it stopped and the blue sky that curved out over the borders to Saskatchewan and North Dakota broke loose. As he walked into the house behind his

father he would feel the first drops and watch them bang the standing dust into clouds.

St. John brushed crumbs from his lips. He looked over at the woman. "You ever gamble?" he said.

"Ned used to take me down to Jackpot sometimes." She spoke loudly, like a waitress setting down silverware too hard. "Had a good time mostly. Long time ago."

"Hell of a town. I nearly got shot there once."

"We went down on his weekends off. Last time he lost three hundred dollars and his boots." St. John remembered seeing blood spread through the white shirt of the man who'd been standing next to him at the bar, and the diving tackle over chairs and round tables another man had made for the waving wood-handled pistol.

"He bet his boots and he lost," she said.

She laughed.

"Just being married to him was enough gambling," she said.

"I guess you'd say I won though," she said. "He drowned just about the time I got sick enough of him to throw him out."

"That's a kind of winning," St. John said.

As he guided the truck through the eroding swatches of the first tarred road, St. John saw the gravel runway, planed and burning, where the Interstate would be laid down. The flagman, an iridescent vest on his bare skin, looked at him.

"I think that sometimes," she said.

She pushed back a strand of hair, turning towards him. "One time he went on this hunting trip, know what I mean? I ran into one of his buddies on the street... I mean the man didn't even have sense enough to get it straight with them."

St. John let it ride.

In his line of work, St. John dealt with ghosts on a regular basis. You couldn't take down the place where people had lived or worked, or stored their possessions or food for their animals without hearing their voices, one on top another, or sometimes, one all alone, low and repetitive. St. John was firm and after a while they understood something he believed: it was better for the wood to have another use than to rot away to nothing in the presence of grazing stock and magpies. It had preferences of its own. To the ghosts of men who had cleared trees or worked to buy mill lumber, it made a kind of sense. They argued for natural death, for dignity, but St. John was persuasive. "Things move on," he said. Also, they liked his singing.

"You don't have to be perfect," Snowy said.

The woman sat in the truck as St. John went into the office of the one-pump filling station. It was an old station, shaped like a large carport and made of cheap, adobe-like concrete, the narrow



original pump replaced by one that pumped regular, premium and low-lead. The side of the building had been knocked out and a white house trailer was attached to it and two trucks were parked by the other door. On the side of one of the trucks was a hand-painted sign that read Sweet Lord Jesus Is The One I Love. St. John came out folding bills into his breast pocket. He was carrying a fifth of Lewis and Clark, swinging it by the neck.

"Terrible thing to get caught short in the wilderness," he said, pulling himself in by the steering wheel.

The first round she drank out of a styrofoam coffee cup that St. John found in the glove compartment and wiped out with his thumb, and after that she drank with him out of the bottle. She had slept through the worst heat of the day.

"Your radio work?"

"Too far out," he said.

She searched back and forth on the dusty band for a station that would stay clear. She gave up but left it turned on low.

St. John thought, forget that he had ever made this trip with other people. First, his brother Edgar who had started the operation with him when it had seemed like only a temporary scheme to buy into the antique market on the coast. They moved truckloads of tables and buffets and bed frames out of the small towns of Montana, until Edgar married the two women in different cities. Until he eventually grew

haggard in the violation of certain laws of time and space and migrated finally to New Zealand, a place said to be much like his home, only with an ocean. The habit of driving all night had begun with him. Also, the route, down through Salt Lake and across instead of straight through Nevada, because he liked to swim bouyed up in the big lake and drive through a city where fresh water, he said, ran continually in the gutters.

And forget that other women had gone with him one time or another. Try to forget, especially, the night spent in the Sunshine Motel in Elko when the hitchhiker who had come on with him began to crash, and the prospect of a long night's roll with her became ludicrous before his eyes, like four tires going flat at once. She threw her guts up for an hour and sat in the room's only chair, sobbing, as St. John sobered; then, because he was there, she explained about running from the police who wanted her to testify against the man who had killed her boyfriend. Who had first taken movies of them and tortured her and then cut up her boyfriend and cemented him into the wall of a shower stall. Forget that.

Driving down the gentle slope of a basin where you could see maybe twenty miles across, St. John imagined he was riding an iceboat. He could feel the wind broadside the back of the truck, the pressure on his fingers against the wheel. Before him lay only sagebrush emptiness, perfectly articulated, a black track enameled

across it. Go off the mark, he knew, and the ice will break quicker than rotten floorboards and you will disappear like a startled child into the boneyard of the American West. Or just run out of gas here sometime if you really want to feel like a man of the twentieth century. But on the iceboat it was not a question of fuel, it was a question of respect.

"What kind of name's Snowy?" he said. "Ned give you that?"

"He had other things he called me." She was holding the bottle with the cap off and her thumb stuck in the hole. "No," she said, "that was from before."

"You were high school snow queen."

"No."

"You could have been."

She sat with one leg folded under her, her free hand catching air out the window.

"My mother started it," she said after a minute. "I kept owls when I was a girl. They got to call you something when you're a kid."

"Sure."

"Well, it's better than Screech."

St. John laughed and she laughed and looked at him and smiled to herself.

"When I'm an old woman," she said, "they'll think it's from my hair and I won't tell them any different. My mother got to be real old and white and they just called her Grandma, and one day I thought to myself: 'well now, that's what it's all about, isn't it?'"

St. John drove the truck.

"And splitting myself up the middle two times wasn't exactly the best thing I ever did in my life, either. I couldn't ever see being a breeder."

St. John had heard how middle-aged women, women just at the point of acknowledging an invisible line they had slipped over, can uncork. How the woman will sit on a bar stool for an afternoon rinsing out her insides with alcohol and fruit juice mixed and then suddenly turn on a room full of strangers and begin dropping them with the indiscriminate birdshot of her life story. He had seen it. But she was only talking as people talk across long stretches of land that does not seem in any way human, talking to a man who was a stranger, but through no fault of his own, only a stranger from a particular shifting perspective in time.

St. John listened.

The sun headed into the mountains straight over the highway and the desert shone gold. St. John pulled the truck over and they waited, not talking, at a picnic table for the twilight to come on. A car passed. He lay with his cheek against the warm wood and she

worked with the heels of her hands on the spot near the small of his back that ached.

Snowy was sitting up adjusting her hair. The damaged Cadillac tilted on the shoulder of the road ahead was a shade of pink just slightly less believable than the clouds lingering over the mountains. Standing on the vinyl roof waving his arms, the old man named Milton could be seen a long ways off.

Snowy grinned at St. John. "A pioneer," she said. "They're not all extinct."

Milton was wearing a tuxedo, a new one, with mustard on the lapel. He looked more than anything like a freshly stuffed sage grouse, and he stunk, for no reason that St. John could lay hands on, of fish fertilizer.

"You got any idea what that god-blessed thing cost me? Cost me my damn life, that's what."

"This is Snowy," St. John said. Snowy's knees were pushed against the stick shift.

"Milton," she said, "drink some whiskey."

"Ma'am, I could just cry."

All his life, Milton had been the owner and proprietor of a hot springs. The baths could work surprising results, he said. Stomach troubles, chronic indigestion, kidney, bladder, and liver

ailments, eczema and assorted other complaints could be expected to be relieved. Limp in, hop out, he said. Milton cursed antibiotics. But, as he was no fool, he had seen it coming. At the brink of being, in every sense, too late, he sold all his land to a developer and went on the bus to Denver where he bought new things until he got tired of doing that and then he took his remaining windfall, still substantial by normal reckoning, in a Super-Save sack and lit out for whatever the coast that he had never seen had to offer an old man with a bag full of money.

Milton handed the empty bottle back to her. She held it up to the windshield and looked at it.

"I'm obliged," he said.

"Under the seat," St. John told Snowy. "By your right foot."

Snowy pulled out a Boy Scout canteen.

"Terrible thing for a man to get caught in the wilderness," he said.

"Mister," the old man said, "I couldn't agree with you more."

St. John watched an animal shoot under the crossing glare of his headlights. On the northern roads they might be deer, standing on the sandy shoulder, eyes glinting red the last moment before they bolted out into the fenders--or not.

"So you never been to Reno, then."

"Never did," said the old man.

"Well, that's where we're going. Snowy and I are going to do some gambling."

"We do it for a living," Snowy said. "St. John has the system. Right?"

"Don't need a system if you're a natural like this man here. Listen to me, Milton. You could have yourself one fine rip with that sack of bills."

"Can't lose it," Milton said.

"Relax, you won't lose it," Snowy said. "No way." She stretched her arms out across the seat in back of the two men where the leather was cracking like the bottom of a dried-up pond.

"You understand why a man like me needs this here..."

"You could undo that tie," Snowy said. She reached over and yanked it down like the string of a grain sack. "Look at this," she said. "It's a real one. How'd you tie that?"

"I ain't stupid."

St. John laughed.

"Ain't nobody's fool," said the old man.

"One thing," St. John said, "you never seen so many lights as there." That was how he thought of Reno himself. Since he nearly always passed through after dark, it seemed to him some vast instrument panel, each colored light blinking in a distant purpose all its own.

Milton worked on the Boy Scout canteen. He hummed. He beat time on his knee. "Cheap whiskey always reminds me of Ma," he said. He hummed. "When we got snowed in I laid out in those springs all morning watching the steam rise out of there and the snow fall. Then I'd go into the kitchen and she'd still be there with her coffee cup full of whiskey and she'd kiss me with those big sloppy lips she had."

Snowy rubbed her fingers lightly along St. John's collar, looking through the weak light at the old man.

"Then she made me read out of the Bible at her. I'll tell you one thing right now, she couldn't get enough of those prophets. And a man shall be as rivers of water in a dry place. That one was her favorite. 'That's us,' she said. Well bullshit."

Milton was humming what might have been "Nearer My God To Thee," his head keeping a side-to-side pace that lagged behind the tune part of a beat.

In the dark, St. John knew, the iceboat must be made to run on instinct. He locked the blades into an invisible track across the surface of the ice, knowing that now he would not need to interfere, only to watch for the unexpected. He remembered lying with his body stretched out, touching as many bales as he could reach, his brother doing the same, as they kept the truck's overload in balance. Snowy rested against his shoulder.



"Algae," the old man said. "Not one more lick."

Well past midnight, under the gentle guidance of house booze, Milton lost his fear of spiritual poverty. St. John and the woman stood in back of him at the table where his chips were mustered in front of him like toy cavalrymen. The report from the front was favorable. Milton slipped chips into the barmaid's cleavage, kept winning. Then, without explanation, the boys in blue began to fall. Before it could become a rout, St. John nodded to Snowy and pulled him away.

"Let's go," he said. "You haven't seen the best ones yet."

Snowy helped him into the truck.

"When you get old as me..."

"Mildew," St. John said. "Shut up."

"Just want you to know why I'm winning."

"I know why," St. John said. "Because you're a lucky old son of a bitch. No other reason."

Milton looked up sharply. "That's right," he said. "I'm a lucky old son of a bitch. That's right. But I took care of myself."

He lay his face over next to Snowy's, looking like a badly stuccoed wall. "Ain't that right?"

Snowy kissed his cheek. "You're a son of a bitch."

St. John started off through traffic. People walked out of the

casinos in evening dress, walked in small groups past junk shops, storefront offices, dry cleaners. St. John made a right at a corner where there was a gleaming all-night luncheonette.

"Stop this rig," Milton shouted. "Hurry, I'm an old man."

He slid out the door before the truck was stopped, hiked back down the sidewalk swinging the paper sack as ballast. St. John double-parked.

"You're right about one thing," Snowy said.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, looked over at her with a one-sided smile. He kissed her lightly, without lingering. She tasted vaguely like lilacs.

Milton stepped loudly onto the running board, motioning for a dark-haired girl in a long red dress to climb in.

"This is Michelle. She's coming with us."

St. John turned on the cab light and everyone looked at each other. Michelle smiled. She had teeth like kernels of sweet corn allowed to over-ripen on the cob.

"You're going to have to get up on his lap," he said finally.

"She's our luck," Milton said.

"You already got luck," St. John said. "Man as crazy as you should of been dead years ago."

Snowy stared at the girl who couldn't have been more than twenty. "You're the one that's going to need luck," she said to her.

"All you can dig up."

"I won a TV," Michelle said. She was bouncing up and down on the point of the old man's knees. "Only we had to trade it for a rug."

St. John wondered briefly if Snowy's daughter would be this old, if she would be wearing a long red dress and smell like a drug-store. The towering sign of Harrah's whirled against the night sky. St. John turned down the strip.

"Michelle and me are getting married," Milton said.

It is possible that the girl in the red dress thought that, in some not very complicated way, the old man was kidding. Or that her one prurient peek inside the old man's paper sack had been enough to set into motion a train of thought that had become, in a very short time, an express, in fact, the unlimited. St. John felt bizarre cross-currents whipping his sails.

"Lord," Snowy said.

Outside it was somewhere between a reasonable hour of lateness and the uncompromising Reno dawn. St. John had begun to think of his recent hours of drinking as a stretch of deep foliage from which he was again emerging into light. He was perfectly willing to call the old man's hand.

"Well, you got all the luck tonight, Mildew," he said. "They have wedding chapels here that are open all night. Any time a fool

like you gets the itch. "

"Not any more," the girl said. "You want to get married after midnight, you have to go down to Carson City. "

"Since when's that? "

"Oh, since they figured out Carson City needs the money. But you're right, they have the licenses and everything. Any time. "

"You have experience in that line?" Snowy said.

"I live here," she said.

St. John was grinning to himself like the driver of a getaway car. He nudged Snowy.

"Maybe we ought to just go on to the casino," Snowy said.

"No Ma'am. First we're getting married. "

"Snowy and I'll stand up for you," St. John said. "I haven't done that since I stood for my brother the last time and I wish I didn't then. "

"I never did," Snowy said. "Of course, none of you fools have ever been to the line yourselves. "

"I'd be obliged," the old man said. "Okay with you if these folks stand for us? "

The girl looked at Snowy and pulled at her strap. "Sure," she said. "They're your friends. "

St. John found the E. M. Percival Wedding Chapel on the

outskirts of Carson City.

"Flowers," Michelle said, still in the vestibule. "I've got to have some flowers."

"Are you a Justice of the Peace?" St. John asked the small man, as he stood blinking in the amazing lime-sherbet light of the chapel.

"That's close enough," the man said. "We have the authority."

"Well, this girl needs some flowers if she's getting married," St. John said. "Something, you know, tasteful."

In a moment the man produced an armful of plastic roses, both red and white, tucked beneath satin. "Here's what we have until morning," he said.

St. John looked at them, quickly pushed them at the old man's chest, suddenly aware that there might be something in the group's total appearance that could make any argument about style more or less beside the point. His mouth tasted like road tar.

The two women were talking beside the ring counter, one of Snowy's arms loosely over the girl's shoulder. What kind of advice would she be giving? St. John circled with his hands stuck into his high pockets, feeling like a ship's captain who has come to a port where the native customs seem dangerously out of the ordinary. Suddenly reluctant to turn over command. The old man had fallen

silent.

"Milton," he said. "Go with this man and get the papers fixed, will you?"

Snowy crossed the small room, what St. John figured to be the original dining room of a house that had been converted to commercial use, like the funeral home in Great Falls where, not long before, they'd laid out his uncle. The ceremonies took place in the living room where there was an organ that nobody ever seemed to play. Snowy's blue smock was limp from riding. But, St. John thought at that moment, she looked somehow the least damaged of any of them. Her eyes were fresh.

"I got married in the Lutheran Church in Kalispell and it rained all that week," she said.

St. John began to say something. The man stepped through the doorway and called in. "I think we're ready."

"Where's the old man?" Snowy said.

"He's not that old," Michelle said. "He went to the bathroom."

For the first time, St. John saw that she was not a bad looking woman after all. Her dress was cut respectfully low and a spot glistened between the tops of her breasts where she'd just touched herself with perfume. Milton walked up next to her, licking the corner of his mouth, then beaming, to all appearances, a man

delighted to be escorting his granddaughter to the Elk's Club Christmas Ball.

St. John felt hungry, cold spreading downward into his intestines. He realized that in some way he was deeply in awe of actual working craziness. He imagined how, in a few days, a tow truck would respond to a highway patrol call and bring the old man's Cadillac in off the desert. It would stand in the sun next to the garage in a town like Lovelock, possibly for a long time. Possibly long enough for the attraction to wear off. Also, he thought as he watched the man show Michelle where to stand, a car like that could be stolen, could eventually, in a way not anticipated, make it to southern California on its own, fulfilling some kind of American legacy.

"Go on in," he said to Milton. "Just a second."

"Snowy," he said. "Let's all of us get married."

"What?"

"I want to marry you."

She looked at him, her back to the room where the others were waiting. She looked into her cupped hands.

"No."

"Why?"

"You could get a young girl like that if you wanted."

"That's no reason."

St. John looked at her eyes closely. In the hollow of her

face they were like stones, blue-green sapphires set into rings that had survived more than a single generation.

"Snowy, I love you."

"It's okay," she said, smiling, leaning forward against his chest. "It's okay."

St. John saw the desert again in his mind, felt the dry wind again. Soon the sun would rise at their backs. Snowy took his hand and kissed it, and he touched the back of her neck and held it, and it felt to him cool and sleek as a marble swan.